

# Sierra Leone

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## Freedom of the Press

Sierra Leone's constitution guarantees freedom of speech and of the press, although these rights are occasionally restricted in practice. In 2013, progress made on the access to information front was offset by serious setbacks for journalists in the courts and an increase in hostile government rhetoric against the media.

The colonial-era Public Order Act of 1965 assigns prison terms of three to seven years for criminal libel and up to one year for the separate crime of publishing false news. In October 2013, the act was invoked against two journalists with the daily *Independent Observer* newspaper—publisher Jonathan Leigh and editor Bai Bai Sesay—following an *Observer* article that referred to President Ernest Bai Koroma as a rat and a dictator. The journalists were arrested and charged with 26 counts of seditious and defamatory libel against the president; they were held for 19 days before being released on bail. Several other media outlets were raided in connection with the investigation, and police questioned at least 11 journalists and staff members. The case remained pending at year's end. If convicted, Leigh and Sesay face up to three years in jail. In addition to the criminal charges, the ruling All People's Congress (APC) party filed a civil suit against the journalists and the *Independent Observer* on behalf of the president.

In October, Parliament passed the Right to Access Information Act, which had been stalled since 2010. Koroma signed the legislation was signed into law on October 31. Media rights advocates lauded the act—which includes penalties for government agencies that fail to comply with its provisions—as an essential instrument in ensuring greater government transparency and accountability.

The media in Sierra Leone are regulated by the Independent Media Commission (IMC), whose members are appointed by the president acting on the advice of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists (SLAJ) and subject to the approval of Parliament, according to the Independent Media Commission (Amendment) Act of 2006. The IMC provides an alternative to pressing charges under the Public Order Act; aggrieved parties can register complaints with the commission, which grants them a hearing. If the IMC agrees that a complaint of libel, defamation, or falsehood is valid, it can request that the offending media outlet publish a retraction and an apology, or it can levy a fine. The IMC can also summon editors at its own discretion. The body has generally demonstrated independence from the government, and has at times appeared to be at odds with it. In April, the IMC suspended the license of privately owned Afri Radio following a meeting between the IMC chair and the National Telecommunications Commission. No reason was given for the decision, which was reportedly ordered by Koroma. In June, Sylvia Olayinka Blyden, a special executive assistant to the president, threatened that the government would step in and charge journalists with libel under the Public Order Act if the IMC did not use its powers to “maintain sanity in the media.” Further, she warned the media in Sierra Leone to “prepare for a massive and long overdue sanitization.”

Sierra Leone has some 25 regularly published newspapers, about 40 radio stations—more than half of which are community stations—and 2 active terrestrial television stations; satellite television is also available to those who can afford it. Most newspapers are independent, though some are associated with political parties, and the print media routinely criticize both the government and opposition parties. All Sierra Leonean newspapers are printed in English, a language spoken by only about a third of the population. A low literacy rate coupled with the high cost of newspapers and televisions make radio the most important and widely accessed medium for obtaining information. Poverty, a lack of regular

electricity, and illiteracy are also factors behind the low internet penetration rate, which stood at just 1.7 in 2013, though the government imposes no restrictions on access. The state-owned Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) operates a television service and a radio network. Television and radio programming is available in both English and local languages. The number of community radio stations has proliferated in recent years, but many are not sustainable due to their dependence on foreign grants and the difficulty of meeting high operational expenses, such as the cost of electricity, especially in rural areas. International media operate freely, though foreign outlets are required to register with the government.

Due to Sierra Leone's poverty, advertising rates are among the lowest in the world, and the management and operational structures of media outlets are not always efficient. Few news providers can afford to station reporters outside the capital, and printing presses and other materials are scarce and unreliable. Journalists are untrained and poorly paid; many work without pay, taking second jobs that can cause conflicts of interest. Economic insecurity leaves journalists more vulnerable to editorial pressure from owners, advertisers, and other businesses.

## **2014 Scores**

### **Press Status**

Partly Free

### **Press Freedom Score**

**(0 = best, 100 = worst)**

49

### **Legal Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

14

### **Political Environment**

**(0 = best, 40 = worst)**

19

### **Economic Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

16